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AUTHOR Gardiner, James F.; Lancaster, Diana M.
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ABSTRACT

Class attitudes among dental students were studied at Louisiana State University in spring 1986, with attention to attitudes toward leadership, faculty and administration, study habits, labs and clinics, information acquisition, social life, and class unification. Class attitudes became more uniform and deeply held as the classes progressed through their training. Through strong peer group pressure, deviants are encouraged to mirror their classmates' attitudes. This results in strong class unification that is helpful in facing a strict curriculum and demanding faculty. Sometimes class attitudes are destructive. Where the class believes that cheating or unapproved shortcuts are valid means to an end, conflict with faculty is likely to ensue. Freshman and sophomores held class attitudes that were generally consistent with faculty expectations. Seniors expressed more independence than other classes, particularly in reference to faculty. Juniors were the most negative of the four classes, and it was speculated that this is a result of heavy clinical requirements for the first time and increased pressure from faculty. (Author/SW)

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# CLASS ATTITUDES AMONG DENTAL STUDENTS

James F. Gardiner, D.D.S., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Diana M. Lancaster, Ph.D.

## Abstract

Class attitudes among dental students become more uniform and deeply held as the classes progress through their training. Through strong peer group pressure deviants' attitudes are encouraged to mirror their classmates'. This results in strong class unification that is helpful in facing a strict curriculum and demanding faculty. Sometimes, however, class attitudes can be destructive. Where the class believes that cheating or unapproved short-cuts are valid means to an end, conflict with faculty is likely to ensue.

This survey represents a cross-sectional view of class attitudes of LSU dental students as of spring, 1986. Items in the survey investigated class attitudes toward leadership, faculty and administration, study habits, labs and clinics, information acquisition, social life and class unification.

The survey responses indicate that freshmen and sophomores hold class attitudes that are generally consistent with faculty expectations. Seniors express more independence than other classes, particularly in reference to faculty. Juniors were the most negative of the four classes, and it is speculated that this is a result of heavy clinical requirements for the first time and increased pressure from faculty.

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by

James F. Gardiner, D.D.S., M.P.H., M.Ed.*

and

Diana M. Lancaster, Ph.D.**

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* Professor, Department of Community Dentistry, LSU School of Dentistry
1100 Florida Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70119

** Assistant Professor, Office of Instructional Services, LSUSD

INTRODUCTION

Students of varied backgrounds come together and go through a common educational regimen in dental school. Long and intense hours together lead to the evolution of common attitudes. Individual attitudes still exist but gradually attitudes emerge which become accepted by the members of the class: what and how much to study and how to make the transition from academia to a profession with the least possible pain.

Students consciously or unconsciously adopt many attitudes, only some of which are consistent with how the faculty views the educational process.[1] When a discrepancy exists, the goals of instruction may not be fully realized.

Student attitudes are as likely to affect learning during the years of professional training as is the education that the faculty hopes to impart. This is not always a beneficial development: if the students view the faculty as antagonists, learning can be impaired.

Although there is much in the dental literature concerning dental students' attitudes as individuals,[2-6] research on class attitudes in professional schools has been mostly confined to medical education.[1,7] Becker and Geer closely examined the formation and manifestations of student culture and class attitudes among the medical students at the University of Kansas. They found that students tended to cohere as a group and give tacit approval to many attitudes toward their education that ran counter to faculty expectations. For example, medical students strongly felt that much of laboratory work that repeated classical experiments was a waste of time. They also found that where medical students perceptions of relevance and importance of material varied greatly from that of the faculty, they tended to find short-cuts or cheat

in open defiance of faculty instructions.[1] No comparable study of dental students' class attitudes has ever been accomplished. This cross-sectional study describes class attitudes as they presently exist among the four dental classes at the Louisiana State University School of Dentistry.

METHODS

A survey was constructed to assess the class attitudes of dental students.[8] For purposes of this study, an attitude is defined as "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner".[9] The authors developed lists of items based on findings of the previous research among medical students. Additional items were written to cover topics relevant to attitude areas such as leadership which had not been extensively explored by previous research. After developing these lists, the assistance of reviewers was requested to ensure that the statements were clear and that the content appeared to be measuring valid and important student attitudes. Faculty members, including the Director of Research, were asked to review the survey instrument. Because the intent of the survey was to describe and compare existing attitudes rather than rate them as positive or negative, the reviewers were not asked to indicate whether they thought the attitude statements were positive, negative or neutral. It also became apparent that some important items could not really be assessed ahead of time in terms of positive or negative impact on the educational process. Instead the reviewers were asked to look for ambiguity in terms of whether the item could clearly elicit agreement or disagreement and whether it appeared appropriate to the study.

To further evaluate the structure of the instrument, an educational researcher and a sociologist not associated with the dental school were asked to review the instrument for design appropriateness and make suggestions for improvement.

After refinement and clarification of the original set of items, forty were retained for the survey. A five point Likert scale provided the measure for response to the attitude statements.

To assess reliability of the responses, items were designed to express opposite attitudes. Thus, agreement with one would preclude agreement with the other. If the responses maintained this distinction, consistency would be indicated. In addition, coefficient alpha was computed as a measure of internal consistency.

The survey was administered to the four dental classes at LSUSD during January, 1985. 238 out of 265 students (90%) completed the survey. Instructions for completing the survey stressed that responses were to be based on each student's perception of class attitudes, and not the individual's attitude. This was done to encourage the students as much as possible to think in terms of the attitudes of the class as a whole. The authors realize that such a distinction is not entirely possible.

Each item on the survey is analyzed separately. It appeared that obtaining one survey score for each student would obscure the descriptive information concerning which attitudes were held in common among students. Percentages of agree, neutral, and disagree were computed for each item and each class. Since interpretation of the findings is descriptive, no further statistical analyses are reported. For purposes of conciseness in reporting of the results percentages were combined as

follows: a rating of 1 or 2 on the Likert scale is considered agreement, a rating of 3 is neutral, and a rating of 4 or 5 as disagreement.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports the overall percentages of agreement with each item for each class. For purposes of discussion, the items are assigned to major topic areas: leadership, faculty and administration, study habits, laboratories and clinics, information, and social life and class unification.

### Leadership

Based on overall percentages, dental students indicate that class leaders do not influence class attitudes more than other class members, and that decisions are not left to class leaders or fraternity members. Further, although the classes select someone who will stand up to faculty, it is important for faculty to like the class leader. There were differences among classes as to the type of leader selected. Sophomores selected a leader who is serious and scholarly, not one who likes to have fun. All other classes indicated the opposite opinion.

### Faculty and Administration

All classes report liking teachers who get the point across quickly, are relaxed, easy to follow, and easy graders. All classes also report that they encourage students with problems to go to the faculty and believe that faculty members in general like students.

Classes agreed that it is important to be liked by the faculty; however, this was less important to seniors and most important to freshmen and sophomores. In fact, seniors do not think that the faculty likes their class. There was also general agreement that faculty teach

because "they can't or won't practice dentistry"; -- juniors had the highest agreement with this statement.

Study Habits

All dental classes report that they do not cheat on exams and believe that it is important to do their best work at all times. However, classes were equally divided in their attitude toward getting by with as little effort as possible.

Freshmen, in contrast to other classes, encourage students who want to do exceptionally well. Juniors and seniors do not agree as strongly as underclassmen that it is important to do one's own work.

Laboratories and Clinics

Dental students dislike courses which do not provide technique experience. Juniors, unlike other classes, do not see themselves as cooperating to ease the load of labs and clinics. More juniors and seniors than freshmen and sophomores indicated use of short cuts in labs and clinics.

Information

Dental classes do not think that the amount of information to be learned is excessive, nor do they decide as a class what to learn. They do think that theoretical material is a waste of time. In contrast to the other classes, juniors believe lectures which do not follow a textbook to be a waste of time as well.

Juniors agree less than others that it is important to gain the knowledge and skills to be a good dentist. Furthermore, their opinion of dental education is less positive now than it was when they entered dental school.

Social Life and Class Unification

Based on previous research with medical students, we expected that dental students would prefer to socialize with each other exclusively. Medical students reported that outsiders lack empathy with the stresses associated with medical school. However, dental students' responses indicate that they do not think this is true.

Fraternity membership is not important to the classes; small groups or cliques are less prevalent in the senior class. Unlike the other classes, the juniors stated that the majority of their classmates do not participate in class social functions. Juniors also differ from other classes on class unification. They disagree that their class is well unified and that the class members "get along well".

The items that were designed to express opposite opinions did indicate fairly consistent responses. These items involved the leader type selected and faculty like or dislike of students. The percentages in the table show general agreement with only one item in each pair (See Table). Coefficient alpha ranged from .44 for the Seniors to .59 for the Freshmen. This represents a moderate level of internal consistency. The Freshmen had the most consistent response pattern which produced the highest reliability.

DISCUSSION

The survey responses indicate that freshmen and sophomores hold class attitudes that are generally consistent with faculty expectations. Seniors tend to express attitudes representing more independence - particularly in regard to faculty.

Juniors showed the most inconsistent response pattern. It was expected that the juniors' and seniors' class attitudes would indicate a

high level of cohesion. The juniors, however, consistently expressed a lack of class unity. They indicated a lack of cooperation for school tasks and a lack of class socialization. Further, their attitude toward the educational process was less positive than that of other classes.

While a difference among the upper and lower classes would seem likely, the particular response pattern of the juniors is difficult to explain. It is possible that the clinical stresses of the junior year may have an influence. It is also possible that this junior class is idiosyncratic.

That students, in general, think faculty teach because they can't or won't practice dentistry may have negative implications for the educational process. Also the positive response to getting by with as little effort as possible is of concern.

The present cross-sectional study is limited in that findings may not be generalized beyond this sample. A comparison of responses to the same questions by the same class during each of its four years of dental education would provide additional information about changes in class attitudes or development of class cohesiveness as part of the educational process. Although many factors may impact on both individual and class attitudes, this would allow a more thorough description of the evolution of class attitudes over time.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the class attitudes survey, it appears that each class does hold certain attitudes as a group. It is possible that these attitudes enable them to cope with the demands of the faculty and the curriculum. However, the responses to the survey questions at LSUSD indicate that while each class expresses attitudes as a group, the

attitudes differ among classes somewhat. Individual personalities may be stronger than class influences: one class may develop attitudes indicating cohesion while another remains less unified.

As might be expected in a professional school, student attitudes reflect an orientation toward technique experience and lack of interest in theoretical information or material viewed as impractical.

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